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Lawsuit Filed to Save Alabama Mussel, Tennessee Fish, Georgia Snail

BIRMINGHAM, Ala.— The Center for Biological Diversity filed a [lawsuit](#) against the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service today for failing to protect three southeast freshwater species under the Endangered Species Act. The Center petitioned for protection of the highly imperiled species in 2010, but the agency is now more than five years late in making a decision on their protection.

“These small but important freshwater animals need the effective protection of the Endangered Species Act, or we could lose them forever,” said Tierra Curry, a biologist at the Center. “The Southeast is home to more kinds of freshwater animals than anywhere else in the world, but the region has already lost more than 50 of these species to extinction.”

The Canoe Creek pigtoe, also known as the Canoe Creek clubshell, is a freshwater mussel that only lives in Big Canoe Creek, a tributary of the Coosa River, in northeast Alabama. It was first discovered in 2006. The mussel is threatened by erosion and water pollution from development, agriculture and natural-gas exploration, including fracking. The mussel is nearly 4 inches long, with a dark-yellow to brown shell and a salmon-orange, soft body. Juveniles have faint green stripes, and the inside of the shell is iridescent mother-of-pearl white. Fewer than two dozen individuals have ever been seen.



Barrens topminnow photo by J.R. Shute, Conservation Fisheries, Inc.

Barrens topminnow is a small freshwater fish found in only three locations on the Barrens Plateau of south central Tennessee. Its range is just three counties — Cannon, Coffee and Warren — in the headwaters of the Duck and Elk rivers in the Tennessee River drainage and in the Caney Fork River system in the Cumberland River drainage. It lives in clear spring-fed streams with aquatic vegetation and declined from 14 known sites in the early 1980s to seven sites in the mid-1990s; it is currently known from only two to three viable populations. Reasons for the decline include water diversions and withdrawals for agriculture, drought, water pollution and predation by invasive mosquitofish. It is 4 inches long, flashily colored and swims near the surface of the water where it preys on mosquito larvae and other insects.

The beaverpond marstonia is a tiny, tan freshwater snail known only from a single creek — Cedar Creek, a tributary of the Flint River in Crisp County, Ga. Its shell has four whorls and is one-tenth of an inch tall. It was first discovered in 1977 and has not been detected in recent surveys, causing scientists to fear that it may be nearly extinct. It is threatened by pollution from cotton fields, groundwater withdrawal and urbanization.

“Protecting these little animals we don’t often think about, like fish and mussels and snails, will also help safeguard clean water that people need,” said Curry.

Freshwater species play a critical role in maintaining the health of streams and rivers. Freshwater [mussels](#) filter water constantly, which removes harmful pollutants and makes the water clearer. Small fish and mollusks play an important role in the food web because they are eaten by larger fish, birds, amphibians, reptiles and mammals.

"The Southeast has an incredibly rich natural heritage, and we need to do everything we can to keep it intact for future generations," said Curry.

Under the terms of a 2011 agreement with the Service, the Center can choose 10 species per year for expedited decisions on whether they should receive Endangered Species Act protection. These southeastern species are three of the 10 species the Center has prioritized for 2016. The other seven priority species include the monarch butterfly, alligator snapping turtle, wood turtle, California spotted owl, Northern Rockies fisher, foothill yellow-legged frog and Virgin River spinedace. Under the settlement 144 species have gained protection to date, and 36 species have been proposed for protection.

Photos are available for media use:

[Barrens topminnow](#)

[Canoe Creek pigtoe](#)

[Beaverpond marstonia](#)

The Center for Biological Diversity is a national, nonprofit conservation organization with more than 990,000 members and online activists dedicated to the protection of endangered species and wild places.

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